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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MONROVIA 001375

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/30/2017

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SUBJECT: FORMER REBEL LEADER DENIES HARBORING FIGHTERS

Classified By: Ambassador Donald E. Booth for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Former MODEL rebel group leader and NTGL foreign minister Thomas Nimely Yaya rejected accusations that he was training 150 Burkinabes at his family plantation in Grand Gedeh County. He told Ambassador that he has no political designs whatsoever, and supports the Sirleaf government as well as U.S. and UN efforts, but cautions that government "witch-hunts" could create enemies where there are none. End summary.

¶2. (C) Former MODEL leader and NTGL Foreign Minister Thomas Nimely Yaya made a point during a meeting with the Ambassador on November 21 to deny accusations from some levels of the government that he was training 150 Burkinabes at his family rubber plantation in Grand Gedeh County in order to overthrow the Sirleaf government. According to Nimely Yaya, the accusations date from 2005, when he left Monrovia to begin work on his farm. "Because they could not see me, they concluded I was training" and plotting an overthrow, he said. He believed that the accusations came from Senate President Pro Tempore Isaac Nyenabo, and former LURD leader and Speaker of the House George Dweh, both from Grand Gedeh County, who went to President Sirleaf with the accusation. He said that the elders of Grand Gedeh were embarrassed by the accusation and offered to hold a feast for him to apologize and reconcile the situation.

¶3. (C) Nimely Yaya met with the President and the Vice President in January 2007 to discuss the accusation. However, the President raised only her concern that Nimely Yaya may be using foreign labor at his plantation, and wanted to encourage him to hire Liberian workers. He assured the President he had no foreign workers on his payroll, but explained the difficulties of finding decent Liberian labors, as they were not used to performing the repetitive farming tasks. On the other hand, Ivorian or Burkinabe workers were used to farm work and accepted \$150 per year as a salary. He asked if he could bring in a few Burkinabe workers to expand his operations. The President suggested that he contact the (former) Minister of Justice as his "thick file" was turned over to the ministry. He declined, saying that the minister had not contacted him, suggesting to him that there was "no case" against him.

¶4. (C) He returned to the farm following that meeting, and there were no developments until about six weeks ago, when the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization (BIN) took a census of non-Liberians in the area, to find only eight non-Liberians, three of whom were recognized refugees from Cote d'Ivoire. The BIN officials charged each one a LD 100 (USD 1.65) registration fee and left. The next day, a detachment of the Ethiopian UNMIL Battalion brought five Liberian National Police officers (LNP) to the village. One of the LNP pointed an "instrument" at Nimely Yaya's house "for about five minutes". When he asked what the police were doing, he was told to ask the Paramount Chief, who advised

him the BIN had sent a letter to the chiefs saying the agency was investigating a claim of 150 Burkinabes living on the plantation and requested the cooperation of the local leaders.

¶15. (C) Nimely Yaya at that point decided to go public, and two weeks later, went on Smile Radio in Zwedru to publicly deny the accusation, saying he was interested in economics and not politics, and for that reason has not sought any political position. He then traveled to Monrovia to meet with BIN director Chris Massaquoi, who told him that "he didn't know anything" about the accusations. Nimely Yaya then went on radio Veritas November 17 once again to claim his innocence, this time saying that the government "appears to have a negative motive" and that it was not in the interests of reconciliation to arrest anyone for something he did not do. He praised President Sirleaf, but cautioned her about receiving poor advice. He added he would raise his case with the U.S., the UN and ECOWAS. (Note: Nimely Yaya met with UNSRSG Alan Doss two days after his meeting with the Ambassador. End Note).

¶16. (C) On November 17, following the radio appearance, the BIN director dispatched another team to the village to conduct another survey, only to find the same eight non-Liberians. Nimely Yaya said that the BIN officials at the village have since been recalled.

¶17. (C) Nimely Yaya insisted several times that the past was finished and it was time for the country to move forward. He cautioned that the government should not "look for enemies where there are no enemies," suggesting that the government, by going on a "witch-hunt" will turn people against the government. "I have no motive to unseat this government.

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That would be defeating my own purposes," he said. He said he should not be compared to other faction leaders in the civil war, as he took up arms for only three months, and only to counter any efforts by Charles Taylor to break out of Monrovia. His rebel group MODEL was formed from young men in the southern region "to create a buffer zone," and he had promised the U.S. Ambassador at the time that he would not enter Monrovia, and would disarm as soon as UN peacekeepers arrived, both promises he said he kept.

¶18. (C) Nimely Yaya said he suspected that Senator Nyenabo denounced him in order to curry favor with the President, but at this point had no reason to believe that the President herself had made any conclusions. He also discounted the possibility of keeping 150 people out of sight in his 45 hectare plantation that runs up both against a village and a major road.

¶19. (C) Nimely Yaya also remarked that a large number of former refugees were returning to the area, especially from Ghana.

¶10. (C) Comment: However credible or baseless the accusations against him, Nimely Yaya has certainly found the threat to his livelihood strong enough to react. It is true that he, as well as several other former warlords, have kept out of the limelight, either to put the past behind him, as he claims, or to avoid retaliation as others believe. However, government actions against perceived threats as well as the continued work of the TRC will not allow the past of key former political players to fade away entirely just yet. End comment.

Booth